

Ed-blogs: the use of weblogs in learning, teaching and assessment

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Background and rationale

This project arose chiefly as a response to the problem of student retention. The project team speculated that pedagogical innovations might be most usefully applied to the retention problem by addressing the various types of student alienation – from the institution, from tutors and their peers. In particular, it was felt that rather than simply supporting students in more traditional forms of delivery and evaluation, some innovation in learning, teaching and assessment might assist in the promotion and monitoring of student involvement. Thus, the team aimed to devise a method of course assessment that involved more continuous student activity than usual summative assessments, could be more effectively integrated with the experience of learning, used to increase and improve peer communication within and outside the classroom, and enable staff monitoring of student involvement and the formative evaluation of understanding and achievement.

Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences (HLSS) has recently embarked on a curriculum innovation involving the creation and promotion of ‘pooled’ modules at levels 1 and 2. These are genuinely interdisciplinary modules, bringing together staff and students from a variety of courses and backgrounds. As both of the project team are involved with one of these new modules in the first semester of level one, it was thought to be the appropriate course for which to devise an innovative assessment regime which could exploit the opportunities and deal with the problems generated by a large, diverse and new student cohort.

An additional, if perhaps secondary, determinant in this project was the general desirability to improve students’ skills in the use of information and communication technologies (ICT), to both facilitate their university studies, and to supply useful employment skills.

Weblogs

Given these issues and requirements, it was decided that students would be assessed through their creation and maintenance of ‘weblogs’. A weblog (commonly abbreviated as ‘blog’) is a personal web page consisting of usually short, frequently updated entries (known as ‘posts’) that are arranged chronologically. Beginning largely as links lists, weblogs have become more discursive, substantial, and creative, and now function variably as online diaries, journals, portfolios, scrapbooks, or displays of interests and knowledge. First named and defined in 1997, when there were barely two dozen sites identified, there are now somewhere over one million blogs online. Most weblogs are created and maintained using dedicated software, hosted on a central server, and can be accessed and updated from any online computer.

Weblogs were chosen as the medium of assessment for a number of reasons. It was thought that the construction of a personal web page (facilitated by fairly simple software requiring no knowledge of html) of which both the appearance and content were the sole responsibility of the student would promote personal ownership of the material. Because

all contributions are automatically marked with date and time, it is possible to monitor the rate at which students are making additions to their blog, and thus intervene when necessary. The public nature of the form brings several advantages, as well as, perhaps, a number of problems. With their work on display to all other students (plus, potentially, anyone else on the world wide web) students should be encouraged to perform to their highest standards. The ability to access the contributions of their peers allows the students to continue and initiate discussion outside of the classroom. Tutors are able to review these contributions and debates to monitor the outcomes of individual sessions, and the progress of the module as a whole.

It was recognised that the reliance on the internet as a medium of assessment might be problematic in that the students would begin with widely varying ICT experience, and inequitable access to computers and the internet outside of the classroom. However, it was thought that some progress on these issues and how they affect students' achievement at university could be addressed through a carefully formulated computer-based assessment. Including a ICT element in the assessment for the module requires the students to familiarise themselves at an early stage with the facilities and procedures of the university's ICT provision, and it was thought that this would assist them in making use of these resources in their work generally. Ensuring that the ICT assessment, though compulsory, is cumulative, extended through the entire module, independent and interactive, and evaluated principally on content rather than the display of previously acquired proficiency, would encourage the acquisition by the students of basic skills and the development of them as far as individually needed or desired. Additionally, it was thought that the use of blogs for assessment, where posts can be made at any time, would allow students to make the most individually appropriate use of their time, and would encourage the effective integration of their studies with their established work patterns.

Being Bad

The module on which the blogs were to be used was newly validated and the assessment had been integrated into it from the earliest stages. PH1000 Being Bad is itself an innovative module, taking an interdisciplinary approach to a range of cultural phenomena, behaviours, practices, attitudes and lifestyles considered to be (in diverse ways) immoral, dangerous, irrational, unreasonable, anomalous or wild. The module and the proposed assessment were well matched. Moving rapidly through a range of phenomena and approaches, it was envisaged that student weblogs would provide a useful means for students to reflect on the material, to expand on the inevitably limited classroom discussion, and for staff to monitor students' knowledge, understanding and reflection. It was foreseen that the provocative and potentially problematic topics of the module might either impede open debate in class, or lead to tangential or spurious contributions, and thus weblogs could allow the students to raise issues otherwise unaddressed, or comment on the progress of the module and its delivery.

The innovation

Assessment criteria

It was decided at an early stage that the assessment criteria for the blogs would be principally quantitative. As there were qualitative assessments elsewhere on the module (totalling 60% of the total grade, with the blog contributing 40%), the weblog provided an opportunity to recognise the degree of student engagement and contribution, rather than simply reward achievement that might be wholly independent of student's commitment to the course. Criteria were framed to encourage an extended and continuing involvement with the module, to reward a reflective and creative approach to a variety of topics, to generate independent research, to foster group identity, and to promote interaction amongst the cohort. It was thus decided that the criteria should recognise the number of discrete

substantive posts to the blog, the degree of appropriate research, and the evidence of consultation of others' work. These latter elements were to be shown by the inclusion of operable links to the appropriate material, and some commentary on their content. The criteria are shown in Table 1, as distributed to the students.

Table 1. Blog Criteria

	No of entries of at least 50 words each	No. of links to external web pages	No. of links to images	No. of responses to others' blogs
A	20	10	5	5
B	14	6	3	3
C	9	3	2	2
D	6	1	1	1
E	3	1	0	1

Only grade boundaries were specified explicitly. The criteria stated that the award of numeric grades might reflect the degree by which students exceeded the minimal stated contributions, and could also reward longer posts, quality of comment and analysis, relevance of links and images demonstrating quality of research, engagement with arguments and comments posted by other students. In addition, it was decided that some recognition should be made (within the stated grade boundaries) of the presentation of the blog page itself. However, care had to be taken that students who had genuine problems with either acquiring the basic skills needed, or with access to an online computer, could also meet the assessment criteria. For that reason, no intermediate deadlines were stated, to allow belated starters to catch up.

Procedure

Students were informed of the nature of the blog assessment in week 1 as part of the introduction to the module. In the second week, 1-hour workshops were run to introduce the students to the skills of blogging. The home page for Blogger (the software providers) was linked to in the Wolverhampton Online Learning Framework (WOLF), and so the workshop also involved the students subscribing to the module on WOLF. A small number of basic tasks were included in the first workshop (choosing a blog name and page design, making a short post, saving an image in the personal file store and linking to it, and inserting a link to an external web page). Students were also required to add the 'address' of their blog to the 'shared urls' list on WOLF. The majority of students completed all or most of these tasks during the workshop or before the third session. For the remainder of the semester, after the 2-hour teaching session, the computer suite and staff support were made available for one hour every week, though the requirement for personal assistance was minimal after the first few weeks. In response to the most common problems, several FAQs ('frequently asked questions') were added to WOLF. Aside from the explicit criteria and tasks, the students were informed that the content of their blogs were solely their responsibility. The blogs were assessed by archiving them (using an offline browser) at the end of the module, and then reviewing them for achievement of the stated criteria.

Outcomes

Of the 148 registrations for the module, 19 were recorded as non-attendees. Of the remaining 129, 118 produced blogs graded at E4 or above. 8 produced blogs with fail grades. 3 students did not produce blogs at all, but submitted other assignments for the module – of these, only 1 passed the module. Due to the qualitative grading it was possible to achieve a maximum mark, usually a difficult achievement in a humanities subject, and 5 students

fulfilled all the necessary criteria. 18 were awarded 'A' grades for the blogs (compared to 14 for assignment 2 and 13 for assignment 3) though only 4 received an 'A' for the module overall. Thus the achievement on the blogs seems to reflect more general student accomplishment and commitment, despite the transparency of the qualitative criteria.

Benefits

The supposition was that the blog assessment would assist in embedding students into a network of staff and peer support at an early stage of their studies, as well as creating an ongoing assessment and module related journal that would allow them to reflect on and share their experiences of the course. It is impossible, though, to fully gauge this original hypothesis, as this was the first delivery of a new type of module.

However, the blogs were clearly a major aid in monitoring student involvement in the module. In the earliest stages of the semester, the non-completion of the basic tasks (setting up a blog, submitting a url) were an advance warning of student disengagement, and provided an early opportunity to communicate with students regarding their assessment. Later in the module it was possible to ascertain if students were in danger of not meeting the assessment criteria, and to contact them accordingly. In the majority of cases this resulted in the students renewing their efforts on the module, or contacting staff regarding problems that they were encountering in their studies or home life. More generally, staff were able to discover and respond to difficulties with the delivery and understanding of the module as expressed through the students' regular posts, and to quickly respond and make modifications where necessary.

The clearest positive outcome in regard to the students' experience of the module was the degree of independent learning exhibited through the construction of posts from prior knowledge, class discussion and further research, and the attempts to integrate this material. Many students came to perceive their blogs as a public expression of their academic progress, and initiated or participated in extended ruminations or debates on the module content, and their understanding of it. Others seemed to become genuinely – if sometimes intermittently – immersed in their blogs as expressions of their personalities, and to ponder at length on their individual reactions to various topics. All of this led to a degree of ongoing and informed discussion around the topics of the module which seems unusually expansive, or which otherwise goes unnoticed by staff.

The flexibility of the assessment, with students able to make posts whenever convenient, was enjoyed and exploited by many students. Although there were some problems with access to university computers, and occasional difficulties with the Blogger server, those students with appropriate facilities at home blogged at all times of the day and night, and during vacations. As expected by the module team, for many participants the blog became integrated into students' living patterns, and was welcomed as an assessment that could be completed segmentally. Initially, many students were exasperated by their inability to grasp the basics of blogging, but the majority became proficient, and were appreciative of the opportunity to learn new skills. This carried through to improvements in their general ICT skills, as shown by the large degree on electronic communication generated by the module – through the blogs, by emails, and in the forum on WOLF. To a large degree, the module's classroom existence became mirrored and continued in a virtual community, participated in variably but often extensively by many students who welcomed the opportunities for a more considered and accessible exchange of views and ideas.

Evaluation

A detailed questionnaire on the nature and delivery of the module asked if blogs were a good idea – 97 responses were received. 77 approved of blogs as a medium of assessment, 16 disagreed, and 4 were equivocal. Many students opined more extensively: positive comments tended to revolve around the acquisition of new skills, the opportunity to

express more considered views than in a classroom environment, the ability to read and respond to the opinions of other students; reservations were expressed over the necessity to use computers and the internet to complete the assignment, and the differential achievement that was believed to have resulted.

Qualitative feedback was received throughout the module, admittedly often in terms of difficulties in achieving the criteria. Frequently, though, the solution of a problem resulted in expressions of delight, and even the problems became part of an increasing gradient of achievement as they were solved. For tutors the blog experience was somewhat mixed. A number of students had problems with managing the blog assessment, resulting in a need for increased staff tutorial time to assist them, although this lessened as the common problems became identified and could be dealt with through general advice and directing students to the FAQs. Setting up and maintaining the assessment generated a great deal of work at various points in the semester, though this was probably offset to an extent by the reduction in other assignments, and the standardised qualitative rather than quantitative assessment of the blogs.

Future developments

The blog assessment will continue to be used on PH1000. The most common problems faced by the students can now be anticipated, and more expansive instructive material has been prepared. Some alterations to criteria are also anticipated, as a result of student and staff feedback. It is intended to extend the use of blogs to the level 2 follow up module, PH2004 It Shouldn't Be Allowed, though with a more focussed purpose. The blogs from the first cohort will remain online, and the current group's blogs will always be available for consultation via either the module web page or WOLF. With the proposed extension of the wireless network throughout the university's student accommodation, the difficulties with completing the assessment will decrease, and the blogs should become increasingly suited to the student experience.

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Further information

More on the history and practice of blogs, and on the module, can be found in the following books and websites:

Bausch, Paul, Matthew Haughey and Meg Hourihan, *We Blog: Publishing Online with Weblogs*, Indianapolis, IN: Wiley, 2002

Editors of Perseus Publishing, introduction by Rebecca Blood, *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture*, Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2002

<http://new.blogger.com/home.pyra> (the source of the software used)

<http://blogdex.net/> (an attempt to index and track blog usage)

<http://pers-www.wlv.ac.uk/~in6928/> (the module web page)